THE SNAKE DOESN'T HAVE TO GET ALL THE LINES

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"The man said, 'The woman whom thou gavest to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree'... The woman said, 'The serpent beguiled me, and I ate.'"
--Genesis 3:12,13 (RSV)

Scripture
Genesis 3:8-14, 20-24

Dictators exert control over the behavior and the thinking of people in a way those of us who live in a free society have trouble understanding. Part of it is a place, or the threat of a place, where totalitarianism reduces human life to its basic biological functions: a place where the dictator's authority and power over the humanness of his critics can be observed and acted out - namely, a concentration camp. George Orwell wrote about it with frightening eloquence in 1984. No one ever did it with more commitment, and with more efficiency, than the Nazis. And yet, in gorgeous counterpoint to the systemic and utter evil of the Third Reich and its concentration camps, is a persistent refrain of human nobility and unselfishness and courage and beauty. Somehow some people held on to this humanity in the midst of the most incredibly dehumanizing environment ever devised. It is one of the most inspiring stories in all of human history. Viktor Frankl is an Austrian psychiatrist who lived through Auschwitz and Dachau. His view of humanity and much of his subsequent work were influenced by the experience. He wrote: "We who lived in concentration camps can remember men who walked through the huts comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread. They may have been few in number, but they are sufficient proof that everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms - to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way." [From Death-Camp to Existentialism, p. 65 - see David O. Woodyard, To be Human Now, p. 87]

> "...the last of the human freedoms -
> to choose one's attitude in any given
> set of circumstances..."

To choose to be, to affirm one's own being, by deciding to be or by refusing to allow someone or something else, to decide who I will be; to hold out for the only thing that is mine -- my self, my being, my integrity.

The ones who do it publicly usually are visible. They are the Sojourner Truths who will not drink any longer from the "Colored only" water fountain: the Rosa Parks who one day decide that they will no more

sit in the back of the bus: the Patrick Henrys who know that to hand your identity as a person over to someone else - even the state - is to be less than a full human being and that "give me liberty or give me death" is, in fact, a moral decision we all make every day. They are the heroes of the concentration camps who Frankl remembers did not become less than human, the Solzhenitsyns and the Shcharanskys and Sakharovs the Gulag could not and did not and will not break.

They show us something that is inside each of us, something strong and free and noble. The fact that they are so visible, however, indicates that most of us don't live that strong, free, noble part: that part of the human dilemma is that most of us do not live up to the potential within us, are less than we could be and, with pathetic monotony, hand over responsibility for our own lives to other people or other powers. In the life drama of most of us the snake gets most, if not all, of the lines.

Douglas John Hall, a Canadian theologian who writes very perceptively about "many of the things traditionally believed concerning the human condition by Biblical faith seem (are) so often corroborated today by sociologists, historians, anthropologists, political scientists,..." [The Steward: a Biblical Image Come of Age, p. 51]

The story of our roots, the very first story in the Bible suggests that while all of us think more highly of ourselves than we ought, at the same time we relinquish our essential dignity, give up our God-ordained status and let the snake do all the talking.

The creation stories in Genesis - that sustained look at the human condition: Adam - all men: Eve - all women, tells us that God is the creator, and that what God created is good: not divided between good and evil, not even ambigious, but very good! The story tells us that our roots are in the Garden, our home is Eden, we are God's. The purpose of the project, the story affirms, is a humanity with God's image built in, with freedom and responsibility sufficient enough to exercise management over all of creation: a humanity living in harmony with the rest of the creation. But the human creatures can't obey the rules, can't let God be God, and tragically take matters into their own hands, substitute their wills for God's will and listen to a snake who, someone suggested sounds like the first theologian, and do the one thing God has told them they must not do.

The portion of the story we read this morning continues to describe the human condition in deceptively simple terms which we are tempted to regard as mythology until, as Hall warned, in the idiom of sociology, history and psychology, it turns out to be declaratively on target. The man and woman, now aware of their nakedness, their frightening vulnerability, are hiding as God is walking in the Garden in the cool of the day. "Where are you?" God asks and there ensues an interrogation. Now a funny thing happened last week as I was leading a discussion of this passage with a group of church women. I had told them that instead of being so determinedly analytical we really ought, on occasion, be silent before this magnificent text and let its beauty and poetry simply wash over us. So they were listening and I was reading, slowly - carefully. And I got to the place where God asks,... "Have you eaten of the tree of which I

commanded you not to eat?" And instead of saying, "Yes, I did," the only thing the man can think of to say is, "The woman gave it to me" and over on the side someone snickered and then someone else giggled and in an instant the group was laughing and even though I knew the answer I asked them why that was so funny and one of them said, "It is funny because that sounds exactly like something a man would say." But then we went on with the exercise in poetry where the Lord God turns to the woman and says "What is this that you have done?" And the only thing the woman can think of to say is "The serpent beguiled me, and I ate." And there were a few snickers but not many really because to hear that is to know terribly and honestly that it is the truth about us, all of us and each of us. We don't live within the rules of the place. We substitute our own agenda for the agenda of the creator. We continue to pour our toxic wastes into the river and bury our radio-active debris in drums that rust, and we kill the animals for the joy of the kill, we overpopulate and we invest our resources, our energy and money and the precious lives of our youth not in the management of the quality of life but in the process of making war on the other people in the creation. We devise socially and politically convincing arguments to fortify our positions and to belittle, humiliate and demean those who try to call us to account. And when we ourselves are pressed on the matter we don't usually come up with anything more original than - "she made me do it" and "the serpent tricked me."

We need, it seems, a new notion of sin... It isn't just pride, egotism, thinking too highly of ourselves. It certainly is not adequately defined as sensuality. We need a definition of sin which incorporates this refusal to be, to take responsibility, to be the responsible managers of creation - the creator has made us to be.

There is a definition, a very useful word, used in the ancient church: sloth, one of the seven deadly sins. The early church theologians understood that pride and sloth go hand in hand to create our predicament.

Harvard theologian Harvey Cox, from whose writing about the human condition I borrowed the title for this sermon, defines sloth, which comes from a Greek word meaning "not caring" as "the determined or lackadaisical refusal to live up to one's essential humanity. It is the torpid unwillingness to revel in the delights or to share in the responsibilities of being fully human." [Who's Killing the Church, p. 111]

In the last century the Danish theologian Soren Kierkegaard taught that the only real sin is "the despairing refusal to be oneself." [Ibid] And about a decade ago Dr. Karl Menninger did a classic work, Whatever Became of Sin, in which he argued eloquently and persuasively that the dominant psychological dynamic of our age has been the reduction of the individual to insignificance. It has come about as a result of a lot of factors: the sheer size of our nation, our institutions and the remoteness of the solitary individual from the places where important decisions are made, for instance. And along with the shrinkage of the individual's importance has come an alarming propensity to excuse the individual from any responsibility for the common life, or for personal life for that matter. Karl Menninger wrote that most of us seem to believe that "it's all out of our hands." We are either victims of genetics, or social conditioning, or bad parenting. Our lives are determined by big

government, multi-national corporations, big labor. And the real temptation is, in despair about our personal importance, to give the snake all the lines, to bury ourselves in the rhythmic lulling of nightly television or the relentless pursuit of personal pleasure and instant gratification celebrated so seductively in the temple across the street.

Christopher Lasch wrote a book about what happens to a culture when people give up responsibility for the welfare of the common life. He called it The Culture of Narcissism and in it he wrote:

"Americans have retreated to purely personal preoccupations. Having no hope of improving their lives in any of the ways that matter, people have convinced themselves that what matters is psychic self-improvement: getting in touch with their feelings, eating health foods, taking lessons in ballet or belly-dancing, immersing themselves in the wisdom of the East.... Harmless in themselves, these pursuits, elevated to a program and wrapped in the rhetoric of authenticity... awareness, signify a retreat from politics and a repudiation of...the past." [p. 4 - see Hall, p. 51]

The trouble with Narcissism and our relentless infatuation with self discovery, self actualization, self-fulfillment, is not that our selves are so unredeemingly sinful, or that the flesh is evil, but that it reflects actually a lack of true caring and valuing ourselves. We were created for more than self-amusement.

Genesis suggests that we are so important God has given us responsibility for the management of the whole creation. Our culture suggests that responsibility for creation is not as important as getting in touch with your needs, doing your own thing, discovering your true self.

History teaches that there is real danger when the individual abdicates responsibility for the common life. Every time another war criminal is tracked down and exposed, we are reminded again that rather ordinary people proved to be capable of monstrous crimes - essentially by abdicating responsibility for their own behavior. Adolf Eichmann did not appear to be an evil man. He simply obeyed orders. The truly frightening thing about Eichmann was not his monstrosity - but his ordinariness. What a painful trauma it was to acknowledge that that kind of reasoning was at work in Viet Nam, at My Lai, for instance.

The thesis that Americans would never behave as the German people who were involved in concentration camps did, was tested at Yale University twenty years ago.

In a now famous experiment researchers chose a cross section of 2,000 males from Bridgeport, Connecticut. Divided into learners and teachers, a learner was strapped in a chair which was wired for electric current. Behind a wall in an adjoining room teachers were seated at a table. An inner-com allowed sound to be heard in both rooms. The teachers were instructed to ask a list of questions and then administer electric shocks to the learners by pressing a button for each wrong answer. The teachers were told that each shock would increase in velocity. There was no shock, of course, but into the inner-com system were fed recordings of screams of pain. The object was to discover at what point individuals would take

charge and refuse to obey instructions out of conscience or compassion in this authoritarian atmosphere. 62% of those tested went all the way, administering all the current they could. The report concludes: "With numbing regularity good people were seen to knuckle under the demands of authority and perform actions that were callous and severe. Men who in everyday life are responsible and decent were seduced by the trappings of authority. The results are disturbing." [See Thomas Harris, I'm OK - You're OK, p. 249-250]

In theological terms 62% were guilty of the sin of sloth. The man said "The woman made me do it." The woman said, "The snake tricked me." The good men of Bridgeport said, "I was just doing what I was told."

Who among us is without that sin? Who has not pondered the fact of homelessness, the existence of homeless people here, of all places, in the nooks and crannies of Water Tower Place and the Drake Hotel and Fourth Presbyterian Church and dealt with that jarring incongruity by mentally abdicating. It's not my responsibility. Who hasn't heard the discrepancy between what we are in the process of spending to turn outer space into a nuclear Maginot Line and the quiet fact revealed last week that our infant mortality rate is now 17th in the world - and dealt with that jarring incongruity by a kind of personal, emotional surrender? What, after all, can I do?

What I can do, of course, is at least not make peace with it, not save my conscience by concluding that it is someone else's business, not mine. What I can do is retain the spiritual courage necessary to have an active conscience. I can refuse to allow the snake all the lines and, at least, allow the responsibility for the common life, for the welfare of the creation, to rest where God placed it - namely on me and you. I can reinvest the ancient language of the General Confession - when it asks us to confess "slothfulness in good" with my own experience and at least ask God for forgiveness.

What this world needs are people who know the story in Genesis 3 and who understand that penetrating and magnificent assertion about the human predicament. We are in charge. The creator has made us the managers of the place. We will not be bailed out or rescued by any power other than our own. If the best we can come up with as the management is a nuclear technology designed to obliterate them and silly civil defense schemes to save a few of us from being obliterated by them -if that's the sum total of our stewardship, that is what it will be. The world needs people who know that the fulfillment of creation is in our hands and at the moment, that is what we are preparing for, with all intentionality and all seriousness.

The late Abraham Joshua Heschel was a beloved and revered theologian, philosopher. He wrote: "The universe is done. The greater masterpiece still unfinished, still in the process of being created, is history. For accomplishing his grand design God needs the help of man. Man is and has the instrument of God, which he may or may not use in concert with the grand design." [The Insecurity of Freedom, see Robert McAfee Brown, Saying Yes and Saying No, p. 49]

I am guilty of sloth when I abdicate responsibility for creation, and

also when I abdicate responsibility for my own life, the part of the creation occupied by me, my space, my time. When I conform to an image superimposed by someone else, when I find myself living to meet other's expectations, when my major goal is to conform, or when I simply allow another person's anger and meanness to make me angry and mean, I have been slothful. God has made me bigger than that. I have been created for more than that.

The Judeo-Christian tradition portrays human beings as the crown of creation, God's masterpeices, given management and dominion over the world, endowed with the potential for freedom and beauty and justice and love. The word, in Genesis 3 continues graciously. The creator does not give up on us when we fail to measure up. Adam and Eve are driven from the primal paradise, into the world, into history, having badly blundered, sold out, relinquished responsibility to the snake. But as they leave the innocent paradise of the Garden all that potential is intact, to be exposed to the ambiguities of human history every single day from then on. And with one thing more. The creator God knits clothes for them as they walk out of the Garden into history. Grace, continuing care, creative love follow as they go. That is also God's word spoken on creation, spoken with ultimate eloquence in the birth and life and death of one, we believe, was God's Word.

In Christ we have a model: human life as God intended it: free, compassionate, committed, fully responsible - sinless life, life without abdicating responsibility. In Christ we can see what the new humanity which God is creating in us looks like. And one thing further: in Christ we have access to a power to be ourselves, to be whole and free and forgiven and recreated.

St. Paul, in spite of his deep sense of human sin, announced and celebrated the new being, the redeemed humanity which happens to us when we trust Jesus Christ.

"Are we to continue in sin?" he asked. "By no means!"

"Be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and put on the new likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness."

The Gospel of Jesus Christ is not an invitation to self depreciating, self demeaning, self denying guilt. It is an invitation to honesty about ourselves, and honesty which includes our excluded status in creation: the fact that we are loved of God - loved so much that God gave a son to die for us. It is an invitation to learn about responsibility: to learn how to say "I'm sorry," when we fail and then to try again. It is an invitation to know and believe and trust the love of the God who creates us, who loves us, who follows us into history with grace and care and who intends us to be responsible, in charge, to be all that we were created to be.

The simplest and most profound truth about us is that the snake doesn't have to have all the lines.

Amen.

O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is thy name in all the earth.

When we look at the heavens - moon and stars and vastness unknowable, who are we that you have conceived us and loved us?

You have made us in your image, you have covered us with glory - and responsibility. You have given us dominion. Give us now strength, courage and grace to be all that you created us to be.

O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is thy name in all the earth.

Amen.